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SUBJECT Reaction to Iran Negotiations/Director Casey Testifies

PETER JENNINGS: It's been quite a day in Washington. Members of the President's inner circle have been doing a pretty good job of blaming each other for the Iran affair. And on Capitol Hill, select members of Congress have been pursuing the facts of what really happened. The Director of the CIA, William Casey, has been trying to satisfy the Congress.

ABC's Brit Hume is on Capitol Hill.

BRIT HUME: The CIA Director spent much of his day shuttling between the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, providing the briefings on Iran that many here think the law required him to give long ago.

REPORTER: Mr. Casey, have you broken the law?

DIRECTOR WILLIAM CASEY: No, no.

REPORTER: Will the operation continue?

DIRECTOR CASEY: I can't comment on that.

HUME: A few new details on the operation did emerge, though. House Majority Leader Wright said the U.S. was paid $12 million for arms sent Iran and that Israel was not the only other country involved.

REP. JIM WRIGHT: We have learned about people who are citizens of other countries and residents of other countries who have been involved in shipments. And I'm not...

REPORTER: With U.S. support?

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REP. WRIGHT: Yes, with the condoning of the United States.

HUME: Mostly, though, the members seemed to be learning more about the operation and liking it less.

SENATOR DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN: I can't believe what I heard, and I don't.

SENATOR SAM NUNN: I think that it was ill-conceived and ineptly implemented.

SENATOR ROBERT BYRD: This whole operation was incredibly clumsy and amateur -- amateurish.

HUME: The law members say was broken is a 1980 amendment to the National Security Act that says Congress must be informed of secret operations in a timely fashion. The one senator who voted against that provision said today he warned at the time it amounted to a loophole.

SENATOR WILLIAM PROXMIRE: When you have anything as vague as language instead of a specific period, it seems to me you're asking for trouble. And we got it.

HUME: Congress hates being kept in the dark, and it can poison relations between the intelligence agencies and the intelligence committees. But if that's the worst that comes out of this, the Administration would probably take it.

JENNINGS: Well, at the White House today you couldn't talk to anyone about the Iran affair without having them suggest someone else was at fault.

Here's ABC's Sam Donaldson.

SAM DONALDSON: Members of the Congressional Intelligence Oversight Committees came down to the White House early this morning for some informal questioning of National Security Adviser John Poindexter, even as the key Administration players in the Iranian connection conducted a furious round with each other of finger-pointing and blame-laying.

The L.A. Times reports that Secretary of State Shultz has told the President that Poindexter must be fired. From his plane at 35,000 feet on the way to Canada, Shultz denied it.

SECRETARY OF STATE GEORGE SHULTZ: That story is not true. That is all I have to say on the subject of Iran and related matters.

DONALDSON: Shultz himself took a direct hit from

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another quarter, from the father of the Iranian connection, former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane.

Consider:

SECRETARY SHULTZ: There's a lot about what transpired that I don't know about.

ROBERT MCFARLANE: It was not kept from the Secretary of State. I'm somewhat surprised at the portrayal that it was, for I told him repeatedly and often of every item that went on in this enterprise.

DONALDSON: No reply from Shultz. But Bud McFarlane received a sharp right cross to his own jaw from White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, who's quoted as saying, "It was Bud's idea. When you give lousy advice you get lousy results."

McFarlane's reply to that was to plead guilty.

MCFARLANE: It was a mistake, a mistake for which I take responsibility. It was bad judgment.

DONALDSON: But none of these secondary players are really what the upset is all about. It's their boss who has the most to lose in all of this. Today the bipartisan Senate leadership urged him to say he too made a mistake.

SENATOR BYRD: Just say, "We made a mistake. We goofed. We want to clean it up."

SENATOR ROBERT DOLE: Yeah. I think most people would agree that there was a mistake in judgment. Even Mr. McFarlane indicates that now.

DONALDSON: As he left for Camp David, President Reagan had nothing to say about all this. In fact, he kept his back to the cameras.

Some of Mr. Reagan's closest advisers are urging him to accept that advice. But the President is said to be resisting it: accepting the responsibility for the Iranian connection, but no blame.

JENNINGS: Well, it sounds like quite a mess.

Joining us tonight from Washington, the House Majority Leader, Jim Wright.

Congressman, did the Director of the CIA level with you, as far as you're concerned?

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REP. JIM WRIGHT: I think he did. I think he gave us the information straight, today. He was instructed on January 17th by the President to withhold that information from the Congress until further notice. And that further notice didn't come for ten months.

JENNINGS: Do you believe him? I notice that Senator Moynihan didn't.

REP. WRIGHT: Well, I'm inclined to believe that Casey was telling the truth. I have no reason to disbelieve what he said.

The matter is really graver than that. The serious thing goes to the fact that the President instructed Casey, as his appointee, to withhold vital information from Congress which the law compels to be given in a timely way.

JENNINGS: What can Congress do about it, if anything?

REP. WRIGHT: I don't think Congress wants to embarrass the President or the Administration. That wouldn't serve any purpose. But we must insist in the future that the law be obeyed and that the spirit of the law be maintained. We've got a government of law, not a government of men. And one of the great things about this country is that even the President of the United States must respect and obey the law. That's all we ask.

And I think if he will consult with Congress prior to these adventures, we might be able to prevent some of this kind of trouble in the future.

JENNINGS: Congressman, thank you for joining us.

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